

TRAVEL

ESCAPE ROUTES

WHERE THE WILD
THINGS ARE

THE FOUR SEASONS SAFARI
LODGE: EVEN WITHOUT THE
ANIMALS, WE'D TOTALLY GO



FLOAT OVER THE SERENGETI IN A HOT-AIR BALLOON



**Self-confessed
wildlife geek
Lizzie Pook visits
the new Four
Seasons Safari
Lodge Serengeti
– and only has**

eyes for the hippos

I'm not a great flyer at the best of times, but when I spot the tiny plane about to take me 35,000 feet into the air above the African bush, I feel like I'm about to lose my breakfast. It's an eight-seater aircraft, roughly the size of a large black taxi, and is set to carry us

from the beautiful and imposing Mount Kilimanjaro to the remote Seronera airstrip in Tanzania, after a nine-hour flight to Nairobi. Ever since childhood, I've kept a checklist of animals I *need* to see before I die, so my curiosity overcomes my fear and I buckle myself in, ready for some animal-spotting from the sky.

I'm on my way to the Four Seasons Safari Lodge in the heart of the Serengeti, Africa's most famous game reserve. Sprawling across north Tanzania and south-west Kenya, the

Serengeti is home to a diverse mix of animals, from a thriving lion population to elephants, leopards, cheetahs and the rare wild hunting dog. From this little plane, I see wildebeest battling their way across vast lakes, flamingos spiralling high in the sky and countless grazing zebra and buffalo. We're forced to circle the landing strip a couple of times due to giraffes blocking the runway. Not a hazard you often encounter at Heathrow.

As a confirmed nature nut, a peregrine falcon is enough to

get me excited in the UK, so on the drive to the lodge I am *beside* myself. We spot wily-looking jackals, flocks of giant marabou storks, buffalo, giraffes and the tiny dik-dik (an impossibly cute miniature antelope). At one point, we cross a river, our vehicle part-submerged in the water and I spot the bulging eyes of a wallowing hippo gazing into our car. This airport transfer is like a safari in itself.

Many tourists use this as their luxury leg of a larger African adventure, spotting the 'big



five' – best seen in January and February when the weather is driest – before moving on to something more intrepid like gorilla spotting in Rwanda. The lodge is nestled in its own little pocket of the Serengeti, with 77 guest rooms, suites and villas – each with its own private sun deck and contemporary African decor. I'm escorted to my room by a member of the Maasai tribe (who are indigenous to the Maasai Mara reserve in bordering Kenya). Kitted out with spears, knives and their distinctive checked shawls, they are on hand to guard the open wooden walkways in case hungry animals (well, lions) decide to wander into camp. I'm told it's not uncommon.

My room is *hands down* the most luxurious I've ever stayed in. The four-poster bed is veiled with mosquito nets, and two rooms branch off from the bedroom – a vast dressing room and a *huge* bathroom with rainforest shower and a free-standing tub – complete with uninterrupted views of the Serengeti.

Best of all is the sun deck, a private balcony which overlooks an *actual* watering hole. I step outside to bask in the warmth and spot a family of elephants drinking joyfully from the water. I shriek and reach for my camera.



LIZZIE TAKES TO THE SKY IN HER PURSUIT OF CHEETAHS

WE'RE CAMPAIGNING FOR THE INTRODUCTION OF ALL-DAY SUNDOWNERS

“WE TUCK INTO CHAMPAGNE AND AN ENGLISH BREAKFAST IN THE MIDDLE OF THE BUSH. I’M STARTING TO FEEL LIKE ROYALTY”

The animal noises don't abate at night. I've been warned about the baboons, so I'm not surprised when I hear them sliding down my thatched roof and grappling with the balcony furniture. But at around 2am, in the dead of the night, I hear the unmistakable guttural purr of a lion just outside and a chill runs down my spine.

I manage to get back to sleep, but I'm up again at 4am for a hot-air balloon safari. We see ostriches, secretary birds and a gargantuan eagle's nest – not to mention breathtaking views of the burning African sunrise.

When we land after an hour of wildlife-spotting, sending a herd of buffalo scattering, we tuck into champagne and an English breakfast, right in the middle of the bush. I'm starting to feel a little like royalty.

Later that day – after a 'remedial' visit to the lodge spa – we set off on a walking safari. Olly, our guide, along with a local Maasai and a ranger with a very large gun teaches us about tracks, dung, flowers and trees. We set up for 'sundowners' alongside a roaring campfire, before returning to the Boma Grill at the lodge for an incredible lobster curry.

Our six-hour game drive the next day is a real highlight. Priscus, today's brilliantly knowledgeable guide, finds us hippos, crocodiles, lions, hyenas and even sleepy leopards. But we don't have such luck with the elusive cheetahs – there are between 1,000 and 2,000 over the 5,700 square miles of the park but they are near-impossible to spot in the long grass. I'm saddened to hear about the problems with poachers, with gangs resorting to increasingly devious methods to make their crimes untraceable – such as leaving poisoned watermelons on the elephants' grazing pastures. It shines a light on the importance of the lodge's Discovery Centre, which we visit later that day – an in-resort hub dedicated to wildlife conservation and African culture where you can help the team track animals and join them on nature photography expeditions.

Later, on another scary plane heading home, my overarching feeling is that I *need* to come back. I'm not quite done with the Serengeti. Anyway, I still need to cross the cheetah off my list. So I guess I've got an excuse.

Africa Odyssey (africaodyssey.com) offer three nights in a Savannah room at the Four Seasons Safari Lodge (fourseasons.com) from £2,350 per person, on a full-board basis, including return flights from London to Kenya. Game drives cost from £200 per shared vehicle.

THE SERENGETI CALENDAR

There are wonders to be seen year-round in the Serengeti, so get your diary out

JANUARY-MARCH

These months see a huge build-up of predators in the southern Serengeti and Ndotu plains. February is calving season for wildebeest, so you can expect to see preying lions, hyenas, jackals, vultures and, if you're lucky, cheetahs in action.

APRIL-JULY

As the southern Serengeti gets drier, grazing animals such as wildebeest and zebra head north-west towards greener grass. The most dramatic part of this mass migration is the crossing of the Grumeti River in June or July. Huge crocodiles lie in wait to pick off the weak as they paddle across the water.

AUGUST-SEPTEMBER

The dry months see virtually no rainfall and temperatures soar to the high twenties. Vegetation will be less thick at this point, so it will be easier to spot giraffes, elephants, warthogs, buffalos and hippos as they congregate around watering holes. Another plus: significantly fewer mosquitos.

OCTOBER-NOVEMBER

During these months, you'll easily spot the millions of animals – including wildebeest, gazelle and zebras – storming their way south from the northern hills as they chase the rains.



THE THREE GIRAFFES: ONE OF THE LESSER KNOWN FAIRYTALES

NOVEMBER-MAY

Bird watching is at its best during the wet season, with the Serengeti boasting over 500 different species, from the tiny 'beautiful sunbird' to the martial eagle – the largest eagle in Africa, with a wingspan of over 6ft, which can pluck warthogs from the ground.